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Review of "The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism"

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Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

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Fundamentalism is a four-letter word in some quarters. It is associated with literalism, anti-intellectualism, and right-wing political agendas. Kathleen Boone's book is a fair treatment of a complex phenomenon. She does not shrink from criticism; on the other hand, she does not pillory fundamentalism. She is to be commended for ignoring the scandals and foibles of television evangelists. As she says, on Sunday mornings, "rank-and-file fundamentalists [are] in church listening to their own preachers, not home watching TV" (p. 113). Boone uses the insights of Stanley Fish and Michel Foucault to "analyze the role, both perceived and actual, that the Bible plays in constituting the authority of fundamentalism" (p. 1). Her analysis is convincing. However, one comes away wondering if her approach threatens the very foundations of a meaningful critique of interpretive communities.

The title of the book indicates that Boone confines her attention to Protestant Christianity. She proposes to treat fundamentalism as a "*tendency*, a habit of mind" (p. 10). The habit of mind to which she refers is the tendency to treat acceptance of the inerrancy of the Bible as the *sine qua non* of authentic Christianity. Boone points out that the creeds of fundamentalist organizations almost invariably mention belief in the inerrancy of the Bible before mentioning belief in God (p. 29). One need only examine J. Gordon Melton's three volume *American Religious Creeds* (Triumph Books, 1991) to confirm Boone's observation. Indeed, this is a measure of the extent to which fundamentalism diverges from historic Christianity: the great creeds of Christendom—the Apostle's the Nicene, the Chalcedonian, and the Athanasian—never mention the Bible, much less an inerrant Bible. In a footnote Boone says that "any creed which mentions the Bible before it mentions God is, by definition, fundamentalist" (p. 117); however, this is contradicted by her acknowledgement that The Way International and the Worldwide Church of God, whose creeds mention the Bible before God, are not fundamentalist (p. 65). To make her case, Boone need only say that belief in the inerrancy of the Bible is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of being a fundamentalist.

The doctrine of inerrancy is the view that the Bible, as originally given or inspired by God, was free from error, including what it says about theology, history, and science. Inerrantists deny that any translation of the Bible is inerrant; only the autographs, the original manuscripts,

were inerrant. Stated in this way, the doctrine of inerrancy is inconsistent with some of the things that we know about the Bible. Boone points out that Jesus spoke Aramaic but his words were recorded in Greek (p. 35); [22] hence, the bulk of the Gospel autographs were translations, and by the logic of inerrancy, not inerrant! The same reasoning applies *mutatis mutandis* to the many quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures in the New Testament.

Fundamentalists must take the reasoning a step further and say that New Testament translations of the Old Testament prophecies are more authoritative than the autographs they translate. For instance, Isaiah 7:14 tells of “a young woman” (Hebrew, *‘almah*) being with child. Matthew 1:23, citing the Septuagint, renders this as “virgin” (Greek *parthenos*); the Hebrew word for virgin is *betulah*. Fundamentalists claim that Isaiah’s Hebrew is ambiguous and can mean either “young woman” or “virgin,” although their favored translation, the New International Version, does not translate other occurrences of *‘almah* as “virgin” (see Genesis 24:43, Exodus 2:8, and Psalm 68:25). Of course, the virgin birth is a doctrine dear to the hearts of fundamentalists. But this only serves to confirm the suspicion that the interpretive tail is wagging the textual dog, to use Boone’s colorful phrase (p. 64). In so many words, the fundamentalist is saying that Isaiah is not as clear as he could have been, and this oversight is corrected by a translation.

Within fundamentalist circles the doctrine of inerrancy seems to function as a statement of faith and not as a hypothesis that is subject to testing by impartial observers. It is quite impossible to test whether the autographs were without error since they no longer exist. At the same time, fundamentalists often claim that the original texts of the Bible have been reliably transmitted and reconstructed and hence, “for all practical purposes the original text is now settled” (Boone quoting Reuben A. Torrey, p. 30). By playing these claims off against one another fundamentalists can dismiss contradictions (did David kill Goliath [I Samuel 17:4-7, 50]?; was it Elhanan [II Samuel 21:19-20]?; did Elhanan also kill Goliath’s brother [I Chronicles 20:5]?), false statements (contrary to Leviticus 11:5-6, hares are not ruminants), and misquotations (Matthew 3:3 effectively changes the punctuation and hence the meaning of Isaiah 40:3) and still refer to the Bible as “the inerrant Word of God.”

In the final analysis, it is the authority of the Bible that the doctrine of inerrancy is meant to safeguard. Fundamentalists believe that the Bible must be inerrant or nothing it says can be trusted (p. 13). Besides security against doubt, belief in an inerrant text can lead one to suppose that in quoting the Bible one is quoting God. However, as Boone notes, “[the] sole authority of the text is subverted by the very nature of texts” (p. 73). Texts require interpreters, and interpreters do not always agree. Boone neatly illustrates these facts by comparing the diverse views of three inerrantists on a passage in the book of Revelation (pp. 41-44). Boone also discusses the dispensationalism of the Scofield reference Bibles and the attendant doctrine of premillennialism [23] (p. 52f). The elaborate cosmic chronology of dispensationalism represents

one interpretation of the Bible but not, by any reasonable assessment, the only legitimate interpretation. As Boone notes, dispensationalism has been criticized for giving primacy to the teachings of Paul over the teachings of Jesus. We are brought again to the realization that even an inerrant text require an interpreter. Fundamentalists wisely stop short of claiming inerrancy for any interpreter; but if this is true, what is to be made of the claim that the text itself is authoritative?

Boone answers that there is an “interpretive [fundamentalist] community” that establishes hermeneutical norms and even “writes” the text itself (p. 61). Extra-textual authorities such as commentators, preachers, teachers, and administrators define and expound upon the “plain meaning” of the Scriptures and the average fundamentalist defers to these authorities. The frequent use of “Bible” as an adjective as well as the use of jargon, clichés, and shibboleths adds to the sense that the only intermediary between oneself and the Scriptures is the Holy Spirit. Boone is careful to note that no individual controls how the Bible is to be understood. Precisely because meaning is the product of an “interpretive community” authorities themselves must remain faithful to accepted norms of behavior and belief—the scandals of the TV evangelists prove this (p. 110).

According to Boone there is no better example of the fundamentalist’s adherence to “what the Bible says” than their belief in hell. While some fundamentalists embrace the belief in a literal hell (p. 47), others are clearly uncomfortable with it. Boone quotes a student at an evangelical college who regrets that the Bible requires one to believe that Gandhi is in hell. Others see the doctrine of hell as a liability that makes one’s apologetic task that much more difficult (p. 104). For this reason, some evangelicals deny that hell is everlasting or, noting discrepancies between expressions such as “everlasting fire” (e.g. Matthew 18:8; 25:41) and “outer darkness” (e.g. Matthew 8:12; 22:13), allow that the descriptions of hell may be metaphorical (p. 105). In any event, fundamentalists believe in hell, not because of the intrinsic merits of the doctrine, but because they believe it is a basic teaching of the Bible.

Boone ends her book with a challenge that fundamentalist leaders acknowledge their role in constituting authority (p. 111). In plainer language she is asking fundamentalists to own the fact that it is not the Bible that “tells them so” but their interpretation of the Bible that “tells them so.” This is a legitimate demand. On the other hand, Boone cannot dodge the question whether the meaning of the biblical text (or any text) is completely indeterminate. She clearly believes that there is a basis from which one can not only *describe* but also *question* fundamentalist discourse (p. 22). She sides with Edward Said who is critical of Fish [24] and Foucault for not providing a basis for questioning interpretive communities (p. 110). How this is possible apart from at least a minimally determinate meaning of the text is unclear.

I question whether Boone can have it both ways: on the one hand to describe fundamentalist discourse using theories that deny determinate meaning to the text while, on the other hand, maintaining that this discourse can be questioned. The only hope she offers for being able to transcend our interpretations enough to criticize them is “our elusive common sense” that we are neither completely free nor completely determined (p. 110). This will come as little consolation to those who take seriously her observation, made earlier in the book, echoing Claude Buffier (in his *Treatise on Metaphysics*, 6th Conversation), that common sense is not so “common” after all (p. 40).